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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [SCUL](#) [SMIG](#) [SY](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: NO DIVIDEND ON SARG-KURDISH BACKCHANNEL TALKS

REF: A. 08 DAMASCUS 00788
[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 00620

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Kurdish Democratic Front Secretary General Abdul Hakim Bashar (strictly protect) detailed backchannel discussions between the SARG and Kurdish political leaders that took place this summer. Issam Baghdy, a former MP and member of the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP), contacted Bashar in Julay, claiming he had President Asad's authorization to speak with the Kurdish political parties on behalf of the SARG. Baghdy asked Bashar a series of questions that reportedly reflected the SARG's core concerns over the Kurdish opposition. Opening a formal dialogue with the Kurds, Baghdy told Bashar, would depend on Bashar's answers. To show Kurdish political solidarity, Bashar also arranged a series of meetings between Baghdy and leaders from the Yeketi, Azadi, and the Kurdish Democratic Alliance, all of whom reportedly supported Bashar's positions and analyses in their meetings with Baghdy. Baghdy's outreach initially raised hope among Kurdish leaders of the SARG's seriousness. However, since those meetings, the crackdown against Kurds has only intensified, leaving Kurdish political figures like Bashar doubtful the government has any intention of working with them, including the SARG's recent publicly-stated promise to solve Kurdish statelessness. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Abdul Hakim Bashar, leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party and Secretary General of the Kurdish Democratic Front (KDF) -- the largest coalition of Kurdish parties in Syria -- met with us November 25 to discuss a series of backchannel meetings between Kurdish political leaders and Issam Baghdy. Baghdy, a member of the SSNP and former MP, approached Bashar in July, saying, "I am authorized by President Asad to talk to you, but you must keep this very quiet," Bashar related. Baghdy told Bashar he would convey the content of their conversation to Asad, which could, depending on Asad's reaction to Bashar's answers, lead to a "next step."

[1](#)3. (C) Following Bashar and Baghdy's first conversation, Baghdy asked for a face-to-face meeting, during which he reportedly said that President Asad wanted to solve the Kurdish "problem," but had serious doubts about engagement and wanted five key questions answered: (1) What was the political relationship among Syrian Kurdish parties, as well as with parties in Turkey and Iraq; (2) What was the KDF's position on the continuity of the regime; (3) What was KDF's position on the unity of Syrian territory; (4) What was the KDF's position on the Damascus Declaration; and (5) Was the KDF prepared for a direct dialogue with the SARG?

Relationship Amongst Kurdish Parties

¶4. (C) Responding to Baghdy's first question, Bashar told us he described the KDF's relationship with other Syrian Kurdish political parties as being linked on central goals but having independent operations. He said the KDF did have ties to the Kurdish Democratic Party in Iraq and that Hamid Darwish's Kurdish Democratic Alliance communicated with Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. None of the Syrian Kurdish parties, however, had written agreements or formal protocols with their Iraqi counterparts. Bashar also added Syrian Kurds received no financial or media support from their Iraqi compatriots. Regarding the PYD, Bashar told Baghdy it was essentially an operational unit of the PKK, had no scope for independent action in Syria, and its connections to other Kurdish parties in Syria were "shallow."

Regime Continuity

¶5. (C) Bashar told Baghdy the KDF did not oppose the regime. The KDF struggled for democracy and openness. In particular, his party, like other Kurdish parties, wanted both a repeal of all "emergency laws" aimed at Kurds and unfettered access to the media.

Territorial Integrity

¶6. (C) Baghdy's question on Syrian territory "amazed" him, Bashar told us. He responded by saying, "Changing the map is not in our hands, but with the superpowers. Neither we nor the president has the power to redefine the national boundaries." He also pointed out to Baghdy that the issue of "territory" in no way appeared in any Kurdish party political platform; he further noted Kurdish areas in Syria were not contiguous. Kurds were concentrated in Aleppo, Afrin, Qamishli and other regions, all of which were "disconnected" from one another. It would be impossible, he stated, to unite them territorially.

Damascus Declaration

¶7. (C) Baghdy prefaced his question on the Damascus Declaration by telling Bashar the Declaration was an "entity fabricated by foreigners." Baghdy contended these "foreign forces" had come to realize the Declaration's ability to foment change was an illusion. As a result, these same forces abandoned the organization and were now "betting on the regime." Bashar told us he rejected Baghdy's characterization of the Damascus Declaration, informing him that the KDF was a founding member of the Declaration and maintained strong ties to the organization. "If the government wants to give up the Damascus Declaration in exchange for negotiations, we will not do it," Bashar declared to Baghdy. Bashar confided to us, though, that it was impossible to tell where the Damascus Declaration would be in ten years and what level of involvement anyone would have.

Time for a Dialogue?

¶8. (C) Bashar assured Baghdy the Kurds were ready for a dialogue with the government, that this had been, in fact, their goal all along. For any dialogue to succeed, he elaborated to Baghdy, the SARG would need to win the confidence of the Kurds. To do so would require rectifying several urgent issues: (1) Repeal discriminatory legislation aimed at Kurds, including Decree 49 (ref A) and reverse the outcome of the 1962 Census, which left over 100,000 Kurds

stateless; (2) Permit cultural expression, including Kurdish language instruction through secondary school, Kurdish Studies departments in universities, Kurdish language publications, and weekly Kurdish language programming on television and radio; (3) Create financial incentives for entrepreneurs to invest in the Al-Jazeera region. On this final point, Bashar observed how in Qamishli, 70 percent of Kurds lived below the poverty level despite the regions' oil, cotton, and wheat production. He cited the total absence of refineries/factories as symptomatic of the SARG's prejudice toward the region. "We have oil, but the refinery is in Hama; we have cotton, but no processing facilities," Bashar exclaimed. As a result of economic discrimination, he continued, 400,000 Kurds had migrated out of the region, some of them abroad.

¶9. (C) Issam Baghdy responded cavalierly to Bashar: "This is your opinion." Bashar told us Baghdy acknowledged Bashar and the KDF represented approximately half of the Kurds, but wondered whether the other half would really agree with his appraisals. To allay Baghdy's suspicions, Bashar arranged three separate meetings between Baghdy and leaders from the (1) Yeketi and Azadi; (2) other parties in the Kurdish Democratic Front; and (3) parties from the Kurdish Democratic Alliance, including its Secretary General, Hamid Darwish. According to Bashar, in their meetings with Baghdy, each leader approved Bashar's statements.

¶10. (C) Since these meetings, which ended in August, the SARG had not taken additional measures to open dialogue and the backchannel connection to Baghdy had gone silent. Baghdy did call Bashar at one point to tell him the "climate in Damascus was good," and that the SARG had a plan to correct statelessness. Baghdy tempered Bashar's optimism, however, letting him know the government would address those Kurds living around Damascus and in southern Syria. The Kurds of al-Jazeera and Aleppo, who constitute the vast majority of the Kurdish population, would not have their status changed, Bashar said.

Crackdown Continues

¶11. (C) As further evidence of the SARG's insincerity, Bashar complained that over the last two months, security forces had arrested 15 members of the KDF, bringing the total number for 2009 to 30. Of that 30, two were currently on trial, seven were out on bail awaiting trial, and 15 remained in prison expecting charges. The remainder were released. Bashar said the current crackdown was worse than ever before. When asked if the situation was worse than after the 2004 Qamishli soccer riots, Bashar responded that at least then "there was the excuse of a confrontation." He added that even after 2004, security services were hesitant to detain members of the Kurdish parties' political leadership. "Now, they have no fear," he said. Muhammad Saleh and Nasser Adin Berhik, both members of the KDF's political bureau, were arrested and face trial. Faisal Nasu, a member of the KDF Central Committee (the body that elects members to the political bureau) was summarily dismissed from his job in the Qamishli Finance Directorate on orders from security after 28 years of service, Bashar fumed. He himself had received threats that security would "crack his head open" if he persisted in his political activism. (Note: Bashar's prestige in the Kurdish community and the fact that the KDF represents about half the Kurdish population has long sheltered him from direct SARG reprisals. These threats, if carried out, would signify a dramatic departure from former SARG policy. End note.)

Turkey and Iran

¶12. (C) Asked whether Turkey's policy shift towards its Kurdish population might prove beneficial for Syrian Kurds, Bashar responded, "It seems logical that our situation would

improve, but we haven't seen it." He contended the Syrian government had boxed itself in with competing alliances, which had immobilized its decision-making process. While there might be Turkish pressure on Asad to take the Kurdish problem seriously, the pro-democracy uprisings in Iran had frightened the regime from loosening its grip. Expanding his argument, Bashar said, "The government knows its alliance with Hizballah, Hamas, and Iran cannot remain the same indefinitely. But if it (the SARG) leaves the alliance, it loses all its cards." The question the government faced, he assessed, was "how easily can it leave the alliance." The question for us, he mused, was "how deep Iran had penetrated" the regime. "Syria is in a critical situation and hasn't decided where to go," he concluded.

¶13. (C) Comment: The timing of the backchannel talks roughly coincided with a new Kurdish push to organize the dizzying array of political parties under a single, coherent, political banner (ref B). Factionalism has long plagued Kurdish activism, and the competing parties have tried at different points in time to build operational bridges between their different agendas. It is noteworthy, therefore, that Abdul Hakim Bashar was able to bring a number of different parties to the table with a single message for Baghdy.

¶14. (C) Comment continued: We cannot dismiss the possibility that recent press reports announcing the SARG's willingness to tackle Kurdish statelessness are part and parcel of Issam Baghdy's talks with Bashar. While the SARG might address statelessness in a limited fashion, the current crackdown suggests the SARG is leaning away from any of the more sweeping changes Bashar championed. We are skeptical the Kurds will make much progress on rallying their disparate parties under a single roof. Kurdish contacts of different affiliations agree that western nations' calls for Kurdish rights would go a long way toward advancing their cause.

HUNTER